STALKING THE HOLY

November 10, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbuterian Church, Chicago

"And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well we are here; let us make three booths... And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen,..." - - Mark 9:5, 9 (RSV)

Scripture
Psalm 121
Mark 9:2-15

One of the wonderful advantages of this place is the proximity of the zoo, just a brief walk away. I can't visit the zoo without recalling lines from William Blake, 18th century mystic poet and artist:

"Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night.
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Blake was not alone in being reminded of the mystery of creation within some of its more spectacular creatures. W. H. Arden once described following Jesus Christ in terms of seeing rare beasts and having unique adventures. Ellen Goodman last week even saw in the troubles of the humpback whale caught in the Sacramento River a metaphor for the United States and Russia on the eve of the Summit... And those wonderful tigers... Blake wrote about them:

"In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

(Songs of Experiences, The Tiger)

On a recent visit I made a new discovery, with equally provocative theological significance...the Snow Leopard. One of the rarest and most beautiful of the big cats, the Snow Leopard is at home in the High Himalayas. It's soft, pastel coloring, quickness and grace have made it one of the most illusive and therefore mysterious of the big cats. In fact, ancient Himalayan folk lore holds that actually to see the Snow Leopard is a kind of ultimate experience of the divine -- not unlike seeing God.

There is a wonderful book by Peter Mathiessen, The Snow Leopard, about an expedition in the Himalayas. Mathiessen is a Zen Buddhist with a keen eye for the mystery at the heart of things. Listen to his description of what it is like, at 17,000 feet where the expedition had to spend the night...

> "At daybreak, when I peek out at the still universe, ice fills my nostrils. The spell of silence on this place is warning that no man belongs here. The sherpas start down immediately; they too seem oppressed by so much emptiness. Left alone, I am overtaken by that northern void - no wind, no cloud, no track, no bird, only the crystal crescents between the peaks...
>
> I flush with feeling, moved beyond my comprehension, and once again the warm tears freeze upon my face. These rocks and mountains, all this matter, the snow itself, the air - the earth is ringing. All is moving, full of power, full of light." (pp. 173-4)

Now the reason for this soliloquy on Tigers and Snow Leopards and mystical experiences in the Himalayas our text for the day, the account of an almost indescribable religious experience three men once had on a high mountain in the presence of Jesus. What happened to them on that mountain, and in the events which immediately followed, was enormously important. It began for them, however, at the level of a mystical, deeply revealing and moving encounter with the holy; the kind of experience human beings have -- in every age. There is something about the nature of things apparently that calls human beings to a pursuit. And there is something about us that wants to stalk the holy.

Peter Mathiessen was looking for something. His ex-wife had died: it was time for reflecting, reordering. His cover was a biological expedition across the Tibetan plateau into Nepal to study the mating habits of Himalayan Blue Sheep. But, in reality, it is a journey of the heart, a pilgrimage. Where there are Blue Sheep, there may also be Snow Leopards.

The pursuit is intensely human and clearly theological. The illusive Snow Leopard symbolizes what every person looks for: the perfect beauty, the moment of truth, ecstasy and fulfillment that will make sense out of all the other moments of life. Mathiesson never sees a Snow Leopard: a few tracks, a shadow darting between the rocks once, just enough to quicken the blood and catch the breath. And because he is a Buddhist and not a Christian, the pursuit itself produces moments of wonderful transcendence - from which we might learn a thing or two...

> "Upstream, in the inner canyon, dark silences are deepened by the roar of stones. Something is listening, and I listen too: who is it that intrudes here? Who is breathing?
> I look about me...who is it that spoke? Who is the ever-present 'I' that is not me?" (pp. 135-6) -- (See Stalking The Snow Leopard, Belden Lane, The Christian Century 2/84).

One time Jesus took Peter, James and John up onto a mountain. It, too, was an interlude in the midst of a chaotic life, teaching, healing, nurturing disciples and simply coping with the increasingly urgent crowds that were now turning up wherever he went. When they set out to tell about this incident, a generation or so later, they had trouble - understandable trouble -

conveying what had happened. They used the word "transfiguration" which is how we still know the incident, even though the word "transfigure" has almost no contemporary content. The incident is in all three Gospels, in essentially the same form. Matthew describes Jesus' face shining; Elijah and Moses appear, the disciples fall down in fear. Mark simply says he was "transfigured," his garments were "glistening white," and lets us fill in the rest with our own imagination. Whatever occurred, and I don't think we can know, three friends of Jesus shared a mysterious experience with him on a mountaintop... They never forgot it. It was forever helpful to them. There is no way, using the inadequate tools of language to recreate it, although Peter Mathiessen's allusion to that "other presence" in the white stillness of the high Himalayas helped me more than anything else I have read.

Human beings have always experienced a sense of God the Creator in the majesty and incredible mystery of creation. To contemplate the expanding universe, the moment of creation before which there was nothing and which leaves both science and theology in speechless reverence has been - for many - a deeply theological experience. In art and music, human beings have been drawn into the deeper significance of the ordinary in a way which, for many, has been profoundly religious. And in moments of extraordinary power, in personal and often indescribably intense religious experience, human beings have known God.

The definitive academic work on the subject, required reading in all the seminaries, is a book by Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy. Otto traced the experience down through history. People have always known what he calls the "mysterium tremendum".., "the hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature in the presence of...that which is a mystery inexpressible..." (p.13)

Literature is full of it. Emerson wrote about "the wise silence, the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related, the external one." Melville described "that profound silence, that only voice of God."

There is more of it in literature, frankly, than there is in the Bible. The Bible is not ordinarily very mysterious. There aren't many abstractions, and it is surely not the secret code of an esoteric cult. Mostly the Bible is about life: commerce, war, sex, children, sickness, death, birth. The Bible nowhere argues for the existence of God nor does it spend much time dealing with private religious experience.

But there are a few exceptions and I conclude that they are important - both the fact that they are in the Bible, and that there are only a few of them. They happen on mountains mostly: Mt. Sinai, for instance: Mr. Horeb and Hermon, the Mount of Olives and a hill called Calvery. And, of course, this special place, this high mountain of the transfiguration.

I am intrigued by the fact that about the time we begin really to dig into the mysterious experiential phenomenon called transfiguration the text itself pulls us abruptly away. I conclude that there is intentionality and wisdom in that. There is also some wonderful, almost painfully familiar, humanness. Peter, who can be counted on for his humanity, is so overwhelmed by this wonderful rich and mysterious experience he suggests that they might want to institutionalize it... "Let's build three booths, Jesus. One for Moses, one

for Elijah, and one for you." Let's capture the magic. The cynic in me sees in that suggestion of Peter's a hint of what has happened too frequently in the history of religion... Three monuments, suitably inscribed... "On this spot in the Year of our Lord 30, Elijah, Moses and Jesus, etc., etc." Or perhaps a church should be built on the spot and people can visit annually and light candles. A little landscaping and soft, indirect lighting would be nice, and a snack bar, souvenir shop. That's unfair to Peter, of course. But humanity does have a persistant propensity for marketing the holy, from healing water from the Jordon River, to prayer hankies from Texas, to Second City's now infamous "Plastic Jesus on the Dashboard..."

Peter meant only to celebrate and remember a moment of exquisite truth, a wonderful moment in time when he knew who he was and what his life was about. I can't fault him for that. Who among us doesn't act like that? But I am intrigued by the simple fact that Jesus didn't even acknowledge Peter's suggestion, but allowed it to hang there in mid-air on the mountaintop. Instead Jesus leads them down, telling them as they descend that what they experienced up there was for them and not for the marketplace. "Tell no one," he said. And when they arrived at the bottom of the mountain they immediately waded back into the crowd of people and resumed healing and helping and teaching. That entire sequence, what it says and what it doesn't say, is fascinating, instructive, and a particular word of the Lord for us.

There is plenty of room in Christianity for the high and mysterious experience of the holy. Sometimes we're not sure of that, nor comfortable with it. We are rationalists and we are inclined to believe that if you cannot see, touch, weigh and measure it, it isn't real. The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke observed "the experiences that are called 'visions', the whole so-called 'spirit-world'... have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God."

The rationalist in each of us wants to attribute religious ecstasy to indigestion, or an overly vivid imagination, or chemical intoxication. The text suggests that we can look again at those peak experiences, be grateful for them, allow ourselves to trust them even. And just as we get into that, just as we are about to institutionalize our private experiences, just as we are getting out the hammer and nails, and assembling the lumber to build the booths, the text abruptly directs our attention to the valley, and the people in the valley. Stalking the Holy, that is to say is a project for both places.

Moses, I am certain, could have stayed forever on the summit of Sinai, having an extended chat with Jehovah, tucking under his arm absolute ethical certainty in the form of two stone tablets. But down in the valley, the people are having a party, they've built a golden calf. The genius of the Bible and the religion that grows out of it, is that it has to do with both places. It is the rhythm of that wonderful Psalm we read together: "I lift up my eyes to the hills" and the Lord who then offers help - also, dramatically, is the Lord of our coming and going, our daily living.

The fact is that most of us stalk the holy more in fantasy than in reality. We're too busy earning a living to look for the Snow Leopard. We observe wistfully, those fortunate few, our acquaintances who have seen the light and whose lives seem so full of meaning, at least as they tell it to us. We sneak a longing glance at the electronic church and in our heart of hearts secretly

wonder why we don't feel what all those folk on television seem to be feeling. We fantasize about some wonderful day when we too will glimpse the Snow Leopard, will see clearly and know who we are and have no doubt at all about who God is and what he wants of us.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the simple but radical assertion that the holy God, the divine mystery, the "mysterium tremendum" is not confined to the top of the mountain, but is involved in the mundane humanness at the bottom.

That is the Good News because we spend most of our time there. It is so good that we miss it much of the time, and must hear it in strange places and unusual voices. John Updike, in Beck is Back, has Beck, a Jewish author, trying to live with a new wife in a neighborhood of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in Ossining, New York. Listen to Beck reflecting on his new friends:

> "...many of Bea's crowd went to church, much as they faithfully played tennis and attended rallies to keep out developers. Yet their God, for all his colorful history and spangled attributes, lay above the earth like a whisper of icy cirrus...whereas the irrepressible Jewish God, the riddle of joking Rabbies, playing his practical jokes upon Job and Abraham and leading his chosen into millenia of mire without so much as the promise of an after-life, this God - nevertheless entered into the daily grind and kibitzed at all their transactions." (p. 117)

The Christian Gospel is about a God who inhabits the high and lofty places, and also the lowly and humble and ordinary places. It is about a God of silent mountains where we find ourselves occasionally, and busy city streets where we find ourselves every day, the offices and kitchens, the operating rooms and class rooms and court rooms. It is about a God to whom the starry heavens bear glorious witness, and whose entrance to human history was not really a magnificent theophany but a routine birth.

The Christian life, therefore, is here, in this glorious place, in this wonderful experience of corporate celebration and it is no less here, tomorrow evening when a volunteer tutor will sit across the table from a youngster and teach that child how to read a sentence. The God of the Bible is worshipped in gorgeous anthem and in the love songs we sing to each other: in the stately beauty of the sacrament and when, in love, we have soup and sandwiches together. God is adored in the mountain top of intent baptism - and when someone cradles an abused baby at Cook County Hospital.

The good news of the Gospel is that we can trust our high and holy experiences, and that we can invest in, and trust and learn from and see God in the wonderful matrix of humanness in which we do our living.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ will be there for us in the rare, icy stillness of the mountain, but he will also "kibitz at all our transactions."

We will continue to stalk the holy, I suppose, each in our own way. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the delightful news that if you can't take two months and look for the Snow Leopard in the high Himalayas, you can find one ten minutes north of here, in the zoo. Amen.

Lord of life, we are grateful for those moments of clarity you give to us. We thank you for experiences so personal and real and intense that we have not told anyone about them. We thank you, Lord of all, for mystery and majesty beyond our comprehension; for light in darkness, for occasional experiences of your goodness.

God of compassion, we here and now thank you for your involvement with us, where we are most of the time. We praise you for your loving presence in the midst of the valley, for your healing power which we have felt, for your reconciling love which on occasion we have been privileged to convey.

Lord God, for all you are and for your presence with us, we honor you, and praise you and love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.